



Region 4

EPA Report: Ocoee River safe for recreation

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) evaluated the Ocoee River as part of the ongoing investigation and cleanup of the Copper Basin Mining District in Polk County, Tennessee. This evaluation concluded that the Ocoee River is safe for whitewater rafters, boaters, and swimmers. EPA's conclusions are presented in the Ocoee River Baseline Human Health Risk Assessment.

Performing a baseline human health risk assessment is a routine step for EPA when studying an area, such as the Copper Basin Mining District. EPA's risk assessment evaluated samples of surface water, river sediments, and fish tissues collected during 1997, 2000, and 2002 from various locations along the Ocoee, between Davis Mill Creek in the Copper Basin area and Parksville Reservoir, plus an area upstream, in the Toccoa River, for comparison.

- **Is it safe to use the Ocoee River for recreation?**

“Yes, EPA's human health risk assessment confirms that residents and visitors can enjoy swimming, rafting and other water recreation without concern. Even frequent contact with the water by whitewater rafting guides, who work on the river five days a week, is not predicted to result in health risks that exceed EPA guidelines,” said EPA Project Manager Rich Campbell.

- **What is a “baseline human health risk assessment”?**

It is a scientific analysis of the risk or likelihood of health problems that might occur if a person is exposed to hazardous substances at a site. The analysis is based on the types and quantities of those substances and ways that a person could come into contact with the substances. The risk assessment estimates potential current and future human health effects, if no site cleanup actions occurred.

- **What substances have been found in the Ocoee River?**

Arsenic, iron, lead, manganese, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were identified and evaluated in river sediments or surface water; PCBs, mercury, and selenium were identified and evaluated in fish tissue.

- **How can people come into contact with these substances?**

Contact can occur through breathing, touching, or consuming polluted air, water, soil or food.

- **Do substances in the Ocoee River pose any risks?**

Based on samples of river water, sediments and fish tissue, EPA concluded that potential health risks do not exceed EPA guidelines for recreational exposure in the Ocoee River. However, EPA found some potential health risk associated with eating fish caught in the Ocoee, downstream of Copperhill, or Parksville Reservoir. EPA evaluated channel catfish, large-mouth bass, and yellow perch. Potential risk varied by type of fish, location where caught, and amount of fish eaten. It is important to recognize that risk calculations are conservative estimates based on eating these fish for 30 years. With regard to the Ocoee and Parksville Reservoir, risks may be overestimated because past mining activities created conditions in which few fish were able to live.

- **Where can I get more information?**

A copy of the Ocoee River Baseline Human Health Risk Assessment is available in the Copper Basin Information Repository in the Polk County/Copper Basin Chamber of Commerce office at 134 Main Street, Ducktown, TN. Summary information and the complete risk assessment document are posted on the internet at the following address: www.epa.gov/region4/waste/copper. For more information, contact Rich Campbell, EPA Remedial Project Manager, 404-562-8825 or 800-435-9233.

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